

Chapter 4

The Case for Informal Spaces in the Workplace

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ABSTRACT

This chapter makes the case for informal spaces in the workplace by emphasising the qualitative benefits they can provide, most specifically in the realm of innovation. This goes against the current bias in evidence-based policy that the most valued evidence is that which can be measured (Belfiore & Bennett, 2008, p.5) and aligns with qualitative forms of representing experience, knowledge, and outcomes. The link is made here between transformation and innovation. Innovation is seen as the fertile offshoot of creating a space for growth, debate and experimentation; one parallel to and overlapping with the more formal channels of established communication and interaction in the workplace. Transformation is difficult to substantiate and requires qualitative forms of expression and analysis to come into view. This chapter aims for a more balanced view of all forms of analysis and argues that qualitative forms are the most effective at capturing innovation.

INTRODUCTION

The focus of this chapter is to reframe the question of management and organizational practices in the workplace from the point of view of the people engaging with the systems and processes. There are a huge number of discussions and debates around the quantifiable aspects of delivering innovation through the framework of

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the workplace: how spaces are organized and how communication flow is managed within the work context. Elements such as efficiency and cost are factored into decisions regarding allocation of space, time and access to various staff. This focus on measurable components belies a bias for quantification.

This chapter aims to make the case for informal spaces in the workplace by emphasizing the qualitative benefits they can provide, most specifically in the realm of innovation. This goes against the current bias in evidence-based policy that the most valued evidence is that which can be measured (Belfiore & Bennett, 2008, p.5) and aligns with qualitative forms of representing experience, knowledge, and outcomes. The link is made here between transformation and innovation. Innovation is seen as the fertile offshoot of creating a space for growth, debate and experimentation; one parallel to and overlapping with the more formal channels of established communication and interaction in the workplace. Transformation is a key word here and one that Belfiore and Bennett flag as highly contentious because it is difficult to substantiate (Belfiore & Bennett, 2008, p.5). Allowing for that difficulty, this chapter will aim to make the case that quantitative forms of analysis have an inherent bias, and that this bias is equally if not more problematic than the inability for qualitative forms of analysis to provide evidence that can be measured. This chapter aims for a more balanced view of all forms of analysis and argues that qualitative forms are the most effective at capturing innovation.

BACKGROUND

The current bias for quantification is the result, as Eleonora Belfiore and Oliver Bennett outline in their intellectual history of cultural policy, of a growing reliance on evidence to make the case for policy. This took form in the 1990's as a pragmatic response to what was then viewed as ideologically driven decision-making. Decisions would be based on effectiveness rather than political bias. Elements would be measured against one another in order to ascertain the best way forward. In an effort to make the case for evidence-based decision-making, "hard data, such as facts, trends and survey information, were widely seen as the 'gold standard'" (Belfiore & Bennett, 2008, p.5). Quantitative forms of analysis took over as they provided a way of measuring and comparing which sated the need to base decisions on clearly-arguable numerical frameworks. If experiences and spaces can be reduced to numerical units, comparisons can be more readily made, and more importantly, argued. This approach was all about making the case and the decision was made to base it on scientific methods as those had the most credibility. The subtext riding below the surface of this approach was (and, it is argued, continues to be) that qualitative forms of analysis cannot be trusted to formulate decisions.

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